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ABSTRACT

Whether students learn more in private schools is a point of controversy among researchers, though the argument for tuition tax credits for parents of private school students often rests on it. In different studies comparing private and public schools, the main area of disagreement is the extent to which nonschool factors affect achievement. The "Public and Private Schools" report concluded that private schools produce better cognitive outcomes than public schools, with half the difference attributable to students' backgrounds and half to private school practices; that greater cognitive growth occurs in private schools between sophomore and senior years; and that achievement levels vary less in Catholic schools than elsewhere. The study's methodology has been attacked on several grounds, but some groups of minority students do appear to do better in private schools. The quality of individual schools varies and recent school effectivess data suggest that good public and private schools share such characteristics as strong leadership, more homework, a supportive learning environment, and fair discipline. (MJL)

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## 16. Student Achievement in Public and Private Schools

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# 16. Student Achievement in Public and Private Schools

## The Issue

Do students in private schools learn more than students in public schools? Yes, says James Coleman in a report on Public and Private Schools. Sometimes, maybe or not necessarily, say researchers who have conducted other studies or evaluated Coleman's work.

A rather controversial isssue for researchers, then, is the validity of several recent large-scale comparisons of achievement in public and private schools. The issue is important for policy makers because it relates to proposed tuition tax credits enabling parents to send their children to private schools. Arguments for the tax credits often rest on the proposition that private schools are offering better education than public schools. Evidence for this point of view is mixed.

## The Coleman Study

James Coleman and colleagues Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore base their conclusions about the superior academic performance of private school students on an analysis of data from the "High School and Beyond" project funded by the National Center for Education Statistics. Using information

collected from 58,000 sophomores and seniors in 1,015 public and private schools, they draw three major conclusions:

- Private schools produce better cognitive outcomes than public schools. Half the difference results from the background of private school students, but the other half results from school practices: private schools require more homework and provide a more disciplined learning environment.

- In Catholic schools, achievement levels vary less than in other schools. That is, as Coleman subsequently explained, ". . .Catholic schools in general do less for students from the most advantaged backgrounds and more for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds."

- In private schools, "greater cognitive growth occurs between the sophomore and senior years."

Attacks on Coleman's Methods

Arthur Goldberger of the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences criticizes two aspects of Coleman's study, in a conference paper entitled "Coleman goes Private (In Public)." He faults Coleman for failing to publish copies of the tests used to assess student achievement, concluding from other evidence in the report that they were "short tests of dubious content and unknown variation." He also attacks the study on statistical grounds pointing out that Coleman does not include standard errors and reliability information that would allow other researchers to assess the accuracy of his conclusions.

In an article in Educational Researcher (August/September 1981), Ellis Page and Timothy Keith question the validity of Coleman's conclusions about socioeconomic background. They sort Coleman's measures of achievement into two categories -- those that relate to school work and those that relate to background. The results demonstrate, they say, that general ability has the greatest influence on achievement. The variation in achievement that relates directly to differences between private and public schools is less than one-half of one percent. Page agrees with Coleman, however, that private schools do generally require more homework than public schools and that this requirement can strongly affect achievement.

In the Harvard Education Review (November 1981), Richard Murnane and other critics emphasize the inherent difficulties of comparing the achievement of students in private schools,

who are a self-selected group, with the achievement of students in public schools, who are much more diverse. They feel that Coleman's statistical techniques do too little to correct this basic imbalance. What would happen, they ask, if academic-track students in the public schools (35 percent) were compared to academic-track students in the private schools (70 percent)?

Coleman responded by making this comparison. He finds that differences in the achievement of academic-track seniors are small, but that academic-track sophomores in Catholic schools do better than sophomores in public schools. General-track students in Catholic schools do better at both ages.

Douglas Willms and Henry Levin of Stanford's Institute for Research in Educational Finance and Governance (IFG) make a similar comparison, also using High School and Beyond data. They find no differences in the achievement of academic-track students. General-track students in private schools do somewhat better, however; vocational-track students cannot be compared because there are too few in private schools. Willms and Levin conclude that "there is no evidence that a child in an academic course of study would improve his or her performance by shifting from the public to the private sector."

## The Greeley Study

Father Andrew Greeley's Minority Students in Catholic Secondary Schools draws on the same data as Coleman's study, so it shares some of the same methodological weaknesses. But his point of view is somewhat different and so are some of his conclusions.

Father Greeley feels that more than half the difference between minority students in Catholic schools and minority students elsewhere is explained by such background factors as more affluent families, better educated parents and, especially, parents' much higher expectations that their children will graduate from college. But school practices are also important, he notes. Minority students in Catholic schools do more writing, have more homework and get more individual attention than their counterparts in public schools. If, indeed, Catholic schools have done a better job of facilitating the upward mobility of the poor than of teaching children of the well-educated, Father Greeley foresees the possibility of a rather ironic outcome: the Catholic population may be "rapidly moving into a category where its own schools will be less effective for it than public schools."

## The NAEP Analysis

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessed many more students than the High School and Beyond project (191,346 to 58,000), in many more schools (4,159 to 1,015), on many more test items. NAEP (which is administered by the Education Commission of the States) collected data not from sophomores and seniors, but from 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds.

Analyses of these data show that, nationwide, the reading and mathematics performance of private school students is higher on the average than the performance of public school students. However, to account for the greater homogeneity and affluence of private school students, NAEP adjusted populations and recalculated means. This analysis yielded quite different results. The national difference in mathematics achievement is not statistically significant; the differences in reading achievement remain, however, but they shrink noticeably. Private school students in the Southeast continue to show an advantage in both subjects and so do black teenagers in private schools.

## Starting Points for Policy

Perhaps the most general conclusion that can be drawn about recent studies of educational achievement is that they have produced healthy scholarly disagreement in certain areas, particularly about the extent to which nonschool factors affect achievement. But more specific conclusions are possible, too, which policy makers could safely use as starting points when they consider measures that alter the balance of support for public and private schools.

- All studies so far deal with averages, which can obscure the fact that no one public or private school is necessarily worse or better than any other. There are very poor public and private schools, and very good ones.

- Public and private schools have different missions and different offerings. Although they are not exactly "apples and oranges," they are not the same kind of apples. Choosing a private school generally involves considering other factors besides achievement levels.

- Some groups of minority students do appear to perform better in private schools, for reasons related to family background, as well as to the characteristics of private

schools. Nevertheless, minority students perform better in some parts of the country and in some kinds of schools than elsewhere, and broad generalizations are risky.

- The factors that seem to contribute heavily to better performance in private schools can be reproduced in public schools. A growing body of school effectiveness data supports an idea that the Coleman and NAEP studies suggest -- that good public schools and good private schools share many characteristics, like strong leadership, more homework, a supportive learning environment and fair discipline.

- The IFG, Greeley and NAEP studies suggest, in different ways, that a change in the characteristics of the students attending private schools would probably lower levels of achievement in these schools and change the contribution they seem particularly able to make to American education.

What To Read


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